



mr.
cheng's
silver
coffeepot

edited by new asian writing
short story anthology

**MR. CHENG'S
SILVER COFFEESPOT**

Short Story Anthology

Edited by New Asian Writing

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'Voices and Hearts'

Timothy Nakayama

I was told that I would be getting my own room; it would be a more conducive environment for you, they said.

They might have been overly generous in calling this space a room. Barely fifty square feet, longer than it was wide, it did not resemble a room so much as a cell. The only way out of the room was through a thick wooden door, which was bolted on the other side.

The walls and ceiling were rough-hewn rock. There was a small, well-scratched teak table with an accompanying teak chair in exactly the same condition. Hay strewn on one side of the cell served as a makeshift bed. Ablutions were solved by the 15-inch diameter-hole in one corner of the room.

All these facts point to the cell not being in a man-made building. The final proof that supported this was what I would call The View.

The wall on the far side of the cell had a hole in it, a perfectly square aperture that took up more than two thirds of the wall's length. The view that lay outside the window was a stark contrast to the austere trimmings of my cell. It was as if some artist had painted a picture from a fairy tale from their youth and decided it would make for a nice painting to be hung on the wall of this rather dreary room.

The first time I looked out from this window, I was at a loss for words, such was its grandeur and beauty. My cell was located inside a mountain and my window was but a small hole in its sheer cliff wall. I mentioned previously that the bolted wooden door was the only way to leave the room in the same condition I entered it – alive. The window taunted me, offering egress back to the real world, but there was a very good reason why there were no bars bolted to it; how could you make your way down the mountainside when the cliff wall was almost pebble smooth, with no cracks or jutting outcrops to grab hold of. You'd certainly be able to leave both this cell *and* the realm of the living.

Looking out the window, I could see plains and hills below, flat and rolling, interspersed with forests filled with ancient trees, wild flowers and animals skittering in their shadowed depths. Almost visible

through mist and fog were the outlines of mountains far beyond, craggy grey snow-capped peaks in the distant horizon that spoke of more mysterious lands.

The cold wind that blew from those distant mountains was not niggardly in its affections, seeking out flesh even within the confines of my cell, sniffing out the warmth of blood and caressing every inch of flesh that it could sink its icy teeth into.

For all its splendour, however, I felt a small sense of detachment, for surely I was no longer in Singapore. I was sure that I wasn't somewhere else in Asia as well; I've travelled a lot, and to my best recollections, no country in the region possesses such a landscape. Perhaps I was somewhere in Europe? And that's a disconcerting question: how did I get here, without ever stepping onto a plane?

Stuck in this mountainous cell, I was not a prisoner. No, I was here because I had to work.

On the teak table lay the tool that was the key to my survival (and sanity) in this quiet prison.

It was a typewriter.

This typewriter, with its cold body, worn-out keys and its inability to Save, Delete, Cut, Copy or Paste, remained the only way I could procure victuals for myself, lest I starved in the confines of my prison. There was no gaoler who would shove bread, soup or gruel through that bottom slot in the bolted wooden door at regular intervals; no, my meals were not a given, they were earned.

I would sit on the chair, or sometimes, even on the hay (which somehow always remained fresh despite no-one ever coming in to change it) and I would put in page after page of blank paper, hoping that the words that emerged would garner me enough food to survive the day. And I have found that whatever got pushed through that slot from the outside always seemed to be some sort of culinary reflection of my written work.

I remember on my very first day, restless and new to this room, I wrote a short little piece, a page of yellow journalism, spouting dooms-

day and mayhem on the escalating real estate prices in Singapore. That did not go down too well. All I received through the slot that day was a glass of warm water and a candy cane that looked like it had melted over time, and tasted like it had been made before Christmas ever came about.

It was all a matter of experimentation from there.

A recollection of nostalgic schoolboy days, on how I used to parrot the English teacher in class as she spewed out admonitions saw my work being rewarded with a porcelain cup of Earl Grey and some bland but sweet chocolate chip biscuits.

In a rare dark mood, I wrote a sonnet, in iambic pentameter, a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions that involved a doomed family and their last surviving heir. The whole cheesecake that came through the slot was beautiful with its yellow body, burnt caramel and wispy layers of white cream. It turned out to be too rich for my liking; I took five days to finish the cake.

Humour, especially when coupled with a fecundity of character-creation that I would like to think the equal of Dickens or Wodehouse, earned me fine little treats. Dark chocolate mints, butterscotch biscuits, daiquiris and the occasional servings of beluga caviar. They tasted great, but not something I wanted to eat every day.

A company mission statement about how customer service was important to the well-being of the business and to the ultimate profitability of the company was written methodically and with a lot of legalese and room for different interpretations. Devoid of any soul or personality and being merely a long-winded formality rather than anything of substance, it yielded a burger and fries.

Sushi, made from tuna so fresh it must have been caught just minutes before, came through the slot after I wrote a Japanese haiku describing an idyllic life by the sea.

A freeform approach, making use of a wild hodge-podge arsenal of anecdotes, humour, allegories and metaphors gave me chop suey; fill-

ing, no doubt, but still, on the purely aesthetic level, a visual gastronomical mess.

The meals got nicer. I had even been getting a couple of steaks every now and again, and even the occasional glasses of wine.

My best work to date was a novella that I finished yesterday, a complex story with an amazing cast of characters, the third person limited omniscient point of view doing wonders for the narrative. It was a page-turner that had taken up every iota of experience, imagination and creativity I had. If my editor had received a manuscript like this, he would have been singing hosannas in my name and weeping with joy.

After correcting the last typo and making some final changes here and there, I put it through the slot and went straight to bed, succumbing to tiredness, for I had been up the whole night.

Waking up, I saw that I must have slept for more than half a day, as the sun was no longer hanging in the sky; the moon was the sovereign of that throne now, and the stars were shining, their luminescence bathing my cell in shafts of pearly white light.

At that moment, food came through the slot. As I saw the tip of the silver tray passing through, I was expecting a gastronomical banquet, perhaps a five-dish course. Imagine the incredulity when I saw before me not some culinary masterpiece but a very paltry meal, consisting of a silver goblet that contained a dark red liquid and what appeared to be a decrepit piece of dry fig on white porcelain.

"You can't be serious," I said aloud, the tinge of disappointment in my voice carrying across the cold air.

"Try it," a woman's voice replied. "It is the most exquisite food we have to offer."

Sighing, and resigning myself to the fact that I would not be having a smorgasbord of dining options tonight, I approached the door, squatted, and took the silver goblet, bringing it up close to my nose for a whiff of what still appeared to me to be blackcurrant juice.

I am no fine wine connoisseur, with my ability to discern wines being at what many of my friends and acquaintances would consider

an abysmal level. This, though, smelled different to any wine I've pretended to sniff at before. It smelled of age, of ancient times and a lingering sense of being and self-awareness; most of all, it smelled *potent*.

I tossed my head back and drank.

This was not any wine or drink that I had tasted before.

It tasted of honey, with just a tinge of sweetness. The spices warmed me; I could taste cinnamon and nutmeg, but I was very sure that there were more in there that I just couldn't quite make out. And there was the aftertaste of fruit, with a different sweetness that complemented the honey perfectly, like two dancers creating a beautiful dance out of their two disparate styles. It went down very smoothly.

My head was filled with that light buzz that usually accompanied an alcoholic drink; but with a difference. Everything I saw and heard was clearer than before, as if someone had suddenly lifted wool from my eyes and exposed me to what the world was really like. Clarity, sense of self, perception and insight... all these, along with my senses, felt heightened. It is that feeling you have when you can see the birth of an idea just beyond the horizons of your mind, and you know that if you ponder about it for just a little while longer, the idea would burst forth and you'd bask and revel in its sheer intensity.

I reached for the dried fig. In one quick motion, I popped it into my mouth and chewed.

There are no words that could possibly do the fig justice. It was not a dried fig at all, but... something else, something entirely beyond the realm of mortal comprehension. It tasted of the love you felt for the very first time as you realized that your parents' love for you was unconditional. It tasted of the sweet euphoria that permeated your every being as you kissed your very first love underneath the summer sky. It tasted of the sense of joy and wonder as you looked into the eyes of your newborn child.

Most of all, it tasted of everything that you ever hoped for...and then seeing all of it come true right in front of your eyes.

My very being was riding this great wave of emotions and sensation, that I became lost and both my consciousness and being started to unravel from the very fabric of reality.

"He is not ready, yet," said a voice, cautious and reserved.

"Can humanity ever be ready for such a gift?" said another voice in a whisper that nevertheless carried across continents and universes.

They think that I cannot hear them. Or perhaps they do, and speak regardless.

But I can hear them. I can see them.

"He has created a work that surpasses our expectations," said a familiar voice. Startled, I realized that this voice belonged to the woman who had served my last meal and was perhaps responsible for the reason that I now find myself here.

The black canvas that was the Universe surrounded me, above, below, to the side and from every angle. Stars glittered in the darkness, scintillating but distant.

They, my employers, stood before me. Or is that above me? I could not truly tell, for besides the background that was the universe and its million of planets and stars, they seemed to me to be the only other things in existence.

"If you are satisfied by that..." one voice began.

"You do not find it beguiling?" said the familiar voice, questioning.

They were all there. Nine figures, their faces hidden in cowls of ashen gray. Though they could have been anything underneath their cowls and robes, they spoke with female voices, devoid of any earthly accent.

"Do not bicker, my sisters," yet another voice said.

"Yes, I agree," one of the nine speakers chimed in. This one spoke with a lilting sadness in her voice, "Too long have we been left to the ravages of time, to shoulder our responsibility all by ourselves. Even we, one day, must pass on from this existence. And who would then wear our mantles?"

"But this has never been done before," another voice interjected. "At the very least, he is not a woman."

"It would be something different, something new," said one. She sang, rather than spoke.

"And isn't that what we are, in essence?" voiced another. "To create something, to inspire, to make humanity reinvent itself?"

"It would make for a most delightful twist of tales, that is for certain," mused another one.

"As long as there remains a spark, as he has shown, our mantles would not go unadorned for long," one of the voices added.

"But he still has a long way to go..." said the voice that held infinite sadness.

"I agree. He kept on going, while others decided to avail themselves of the easy way out. Many succumbed to the ramblings of their inner demons and chose the window. But even though he is the only one to have earned the taste of ambrosia, it does not mean that he is ready. Far from it."

"Still, he has proven that he has that seed. And hopefully, it will grow within him, make him stronger, so that he can bear the heavy responsibility that falls upon us, my sisters. For our roles bear not responsibility onto ourselves, but for the very passions and minds of humanity."

"Then let us return him, my sisters, and await the coming of a new beginning. The plans are set in fruition, and we shall see how the seed grows," said one of the nine. She paused, looking at the other eight. "Do you all agree to this, sisters?"

There was a silence, one that carried over through time and space. It felt like humanity's entire fate was hinged on this one moment in time, as if any decision made now would truly change the fate of the whole of creation.

The eight other sisters murmured their agreement.

And the Universe collapsed onto itself.

I sat on the East West MRT Line, waiting patiently for the train to reach the Tampines station. I was looking forward to a good home-cooked dinner tonight.

The train was quiet except for a young man on the other side of the carriage who was softly reciting one of Shakespeare's sonnets to his girlfriend. The words seemed distant to me, as if they were spoken in a dream in which I was really paying attention to something else, but my English Literature degree soon kicked in and I identified the sonnet being recited as Sonnet 38.

On the opposite side of the train, seated on the seat directly facing me, was a young girl, still wearing her school uniform. She was writing in a leather-bound diary, which rather surprised me seeing as how many children today now seem to own iPads and smartphones. But this girl was writing, using a felt-tip pen on a sheet of paper. I wondered what she was writing. Was she writing an account of how a boy she fancied in class almost talked to her today? Perhaps she was simply expressing her thoughts on what happened at last night's family dinner. Or maybe she was creating stories, ones where she is secretly a princess from some far-off land, and that one day her royal subjects will come back to get her and bring her back to her castle. She was engrossed in her work, whatever it was.

The train was stopping at one of the stations, and I heard the familiar patter of human feet getting onto the train.

A woman came and sat next to me; I could not but help to look at her.

Her hair was straight and a startling blonde. As she looked at me, I could see that the windows to her soul were an emerald green. Her skin glowed, and her lithe body moved with a grace that would put a dancer to shame. I could not tell her age, for she appeared young, but her presence spoke of a wisdom beyond years, decades or centuries.

She carried a heart. It was floating in formaldehyde in a large, cylindrical glass container. She held it in her lap as if it weighed no more than a feather.

Even before she said hello, I knew her voice would be familiar. The memory of her voice, and of the eight others, was etched forever in the recesses of my mind.

Although I was tired, we talked about her, the heart inside the glass container, who it had once belonged to, why she carried it and about a great many other things, both big and small, for the rest of the train's journey.

Note: While attending a barbecue party six years ago, I conversed with a young man about the connection between writing and food. The inspiration for this short story came to me after that conversation and I remain very grateful for his insights and guiding light.